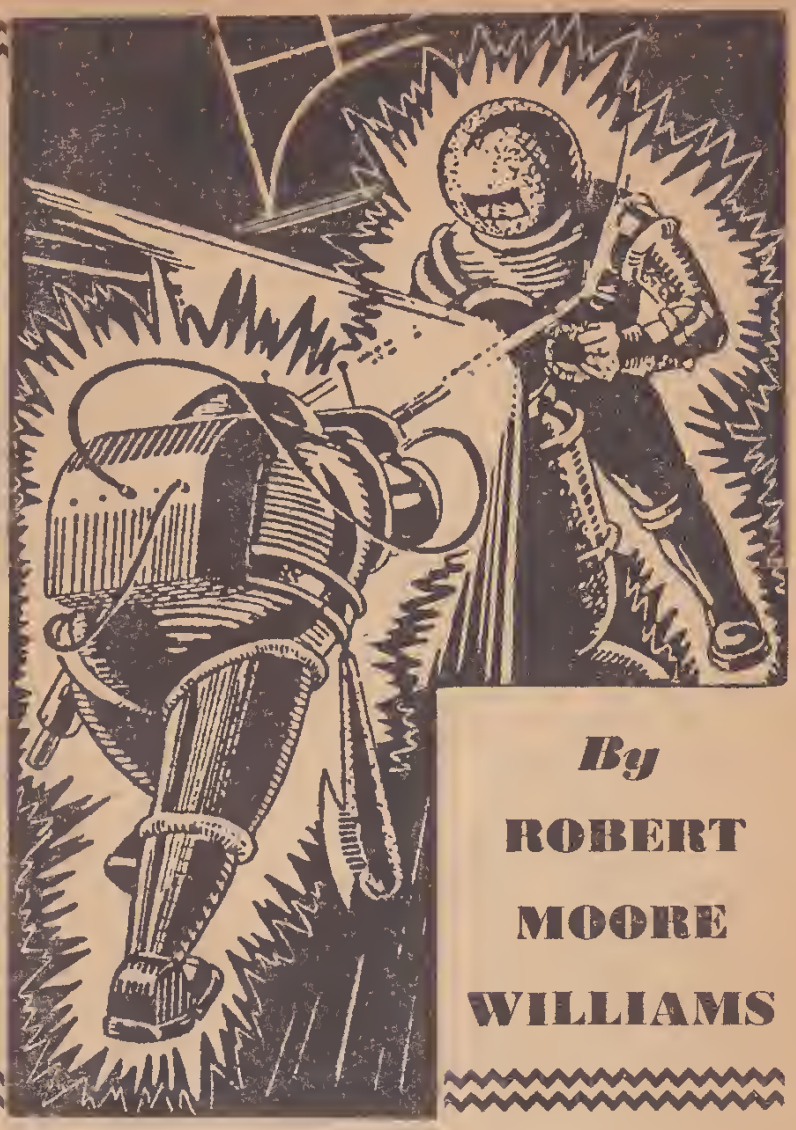
RED DEATH OF MARS

by R.M.Williams



FAMOUS AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

RED DEATH OF MARS



By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

With better space ships exploration of other worlds brings more unpredictable hazards of mystery and death.

SPARKS AVERY, on vigil beside his radio equipment, saw the three men coming. He didn't have to look twice to know that something was wrong. Rising, he opened the controls that manipulated the outer door of the lock.

From the stern of the ship came a rattle of pots and pans as Shorty Adams, the dour cook, prepared the evening meal.

Angus McIlrath, far-wandering son of Scotland, came forward from his engine room. Momentarily, as he opened the door, the muted hiss of the uranium fission engines sounded.

"What is it, lad?" McIlrath asked.

Sparks pointed to the three men. They were nearer now. Coming across the sandy square, the dust splashed around their feet and hung in an eddying cloud behind them, dust that had never known rain.

McIlrath squinted through the

double glass of the port, shielding his old eyes against the thin sun glare of Mars. "I don't like their faces, lad."

Sparks did not answer. Heavy boots clumped in the lock. The outer door clanged. Air hissed softly. The inner door opened.

Martin Frome, tall and thin, came first. His blue-grey eyes rested for an instant on the radio man. He said nothing. Behind him came James Sutter, swinging his long arms like a waddling ape. And last came Vincent Orsatti, blinking weak eyes behind thick-lensed spectacles.

"Is everything all right in the ship?" Frome asked.

"Right, sir," Sparks answered.

"You kept close watch from the ports, as I directed?"

"Yes."

"You observed nothing unusual, no movement of any kind?"

"Nothing."

Frome turned to McIlrath. "Are the engines ready?"

"The engines," said McIlrath evenly. "are always ready."

"Keep them that way," said Frome flatly.

McIlrath touched his cap with two fingers. "Aye, captain."

Frome turned to the two men who had entered with him. "Sutter, prepare for immediate transmission by radio to our main base a short archaeological report on the city itself."

The archaeologist, already pulling off his heavy garments, clumped across the room to a table.

"Orsatti," Frome said, "you will oblige me greatly if you will tackle a report on this." He opened the knapsack that he carried, took an object from it which he laid on a table.

"Gladly, captain," Orsatti answered. "Oh. On that?"

There was startled inquiry in Orsatti's voice. Sparks leaned forward to look at the object Frome had laid on the table. A gleam of brilliant ruby lanced out from it. "What is it?" he asked.

"We don't know," Frome answered. "They're scattered everywhere, all over the city. In one place we found them piled three feet high against a door, like a load of coal dumped from a truck. They look like jewels, but they aren't that."

It did look like a jewel, like a ruby as big as a man's first. It was round and its surface was a mass of facets from which reddish beams of reflected light winked

"But, captain," Orsatti protested. "My specialty is biochemistry. I am also a metallurgist, of sorts, but this doesn't fall within either of my fields."

"Describe it as best you can," Frome said gruffly. "While I prepare a report on the fate of our first expedition to this triply-cursed city of Torms."

"You found them?" Sparks interrupted quickly.

"We located their ship from the air, before we landed."

"I know that. But the men—"

Frome's lips knifed into a straight line. "We found the men, too."

"Oh," Sparks answered. For a second he stared at the captain, his face working. Then he turned on his heel and walked over and eased his lithe body into the chair in front of the radio transmitter. McIlrath looked at him sadly, but said nothing.

Orsatti's report was finished first. He handed the single sheet to the radio man. Sparks read:

"The jewellike objects which we have discovered here in Torms seem to be unique. So far as my personal knowledge goes, they have never been reported elsewhere on Mars.

"We picked them up all over the city. Apparently the first expedition discovered them, for we found several in their ship, one under the the commander's bunk, others near the vessel.

"They appear either singly or in groups that may run as high as several hundreds. In one place we found thousands of them piled, as Captain Frome described it, "like coal in front of a basement door." It is doubtful that they belonged to the unknown inhabitants of this city. A more likely hypothesis is that they have been brought here after the inhabitants died.

"In appearance they much resemble gigantic jewels, and at first glance, they seem to have been carved into definite facets. A more careful examination, however, discloses that the facets are natural and apparently result from the crystalline structure of these strange objects.

"Another unique characteristic is their fragility. Sutter dropped one of them. It shattered into fragments so minute as to be almost invisible, and then, to add to our uncertainty about these crystals, the fragments rapidly dissolved into a thin red gas which seemed to have a tendency to flow together.

"We have as yet not been able to suggest an adequate explanation for the origin of these crystals or to determine what they really are. —Signed, VINCENT ORSATTI, biochemist with the rescue expedition to Torms."

Sparks snapped a series of switches A transformer hummed. Radio tubes warmed. He spoke into the microphone. "Rescue ship Kepler calling Main Base. Rescue ship Kepler calling Main Base."

"Go ahead, rescue ship," the loudspeaker answered.

By the time he had finished the first message, Sutter had completed his report. Sparks started reading the archaeologist's account into the microphone.

"Unquestionably this is the most important archaeological discovery made since the first ship landed on Mars eleven years ago. It is not necessary for me to recount here the explorations made since that date.

"You recall the eagerness with which the first exploratory efforts were carried out, the hurried, frantic search for intelligent life on Mars. There was never any question that life had existed here. Dust had almost filled the canals, dust covered the sites, but the canals and the sites proved that a race of remarkable scientific achievement had developed on this planet. You recall how our eagerness faded into wonder as the reports of the exploring parties came in. They found cities—with sand drifting down the streets. The condition of the cities indicated that they had been abandoned in a manner which suggested that the inhabitants had slowly fled before an advancing enemy. We found tools scattered everywhere, ornaments, the strange scroll books covered with indecipherable hieroglyphics. But we never found the race that had created these things. We found

their bones dry in the sands. But we never found them. Nor did we find the enemy before which they had fled.

"Nor are there any inhabitants here in this city of Torms. But there is something here that I regard as very significant.

"Here everything is in perfect order. The books are neatly stacked in the shelves, the contents of the few houses we entered are in place, and the tools and engines of the race that built this city are packed in the equivalent of cosmoline, a heavy grease that protects them from rusting.

"Everything here is in perfect order—as if the owners planned to return at some future day.

"A secret is hidden here, a secret that may account for the disappearance of the race that once inhabited Mars. This city is newer than any of the others we have found. It was abandoned last. The clue to the fate of the life on this planet is here.

"Upon the desirability of determining the fate of this people, of solving the vast mystery that shrouds this planet, I need not comment.

"I therefore recommend that a a most careful investigation be made here."

"Signed—JAMES SUTTER."

Sparks took a deep breath. "End of the second report," he said.

"It sounds interesting," the speaker said. "But have you got any dope on what happened to the first expedition?"

"It will be along in a minute," Sparks answered.

"All right, don't snap my head off," the speaker grated. The operator's voice trailed into suddenly embarrassed silence. "Avery, I'm sorry. I—just forgot."

"Skip it," the radio man said gruffly. "I'm not asking for any sympathy." He looked up. Captain Frome, his face looking as if it had been chisled from granite, stood beside him.

"Transmit this," Frome said. He laid his hand on the radio operator's shoulder, his fingers dug into the flesh.

Sparks didn't feel them. He read the message. "O.K.," he said, "that's what I wanted to know."

Frome's voice was suspiciously husky. "Lad, I'm sorry."

"You can skip that, too," Sparks answered. Frome walked away. The operator's voice droned into the microphone, repeating the message Frome had given him.

"October 16, 2347.—When the radio signals of the first expedition to Torms ceased coming through, we were sent to ascertain if the expedition was in trouble. This is a a report of what we found.

"We sighted the ship from the air. It was resting in one of the squares peculiar to Martian cities. We landed as near to it as we could, in a nearby square, and immediately Orsatti, Sutter and myself walked to the ship, leaving Avery, our radio operator, McIlrath, our engineer, and Adams, our cook, to guard our own vessel.

"I regret to inform you that we found the three members of the first expedition dead.

"We were unable to determine the cause of death. There were no wounds on their bodies, but the expression on their faces indicated that they had died in agony. Commander Richard Avery was in his bunk.

His legs and arms, stiffened in death, were drawn up in a position that hinted he had been aroused from slumber and had tried to defend himself. However, this is merely an impression. No evidence substantiates it. Samuel Funk, the archaeologist, was at the radio transmitter. The impression I received was that he died trying to call for help. The radio set was dead because of power failure, which is utterly incredible, for the power that fed the set was drawn directly from the uranium fission driving engines, which had ceased to operate. In my personal experience this is the first and only time an uranium fission engine has failed to function. I can suggest no reason for this failure. However, the engines are dead. We tested them.

"John Orms, language expert who was attempting to decipher the Martian language, was found at some distance from the ship. His tracks in the sand indicated he had fled from the vessel. The same agony was on his face.

"In an effort to determine if the ship had been attacked, we examined the sand near it. No footprints, other than those made by the three men, were found.

"We buried them in the sand of the square in which their ship had landed.

"We will make a complete investigation. It is essential that we know not only what caused their deaths, but what stopped the engines of their ship. Also we will attempt to solve the mystery of this city, as indicated by James Sutter, our achaeologist. Signed—MARTIN FROME, captain of the rescue ship Kepler."

Sparks' steady voice faltered. He swallowed. Then he spoke again. "This is the end of the transmission at this time." He snapped off the transmitter.

There was silence in the ship Sparks looked at the radio equipment, saying nothing. He raised his head when a voice spoke.

"Ye're a haard man, Martin Frome." It was Angus McIlrath. In moments of stress that burr of his far-distant homeland appeared in his voice.

"You need not remind me of that fact, Angus," Frome answered.

"Skip it, Angus," said Sparks bluntly.

"But 'twas yer own faither, lad, that they buried there. The least they could have done was to tell ye as soon as they returned—what they had found—instead of making ye wait and learn it from the messages." He turned to Frome. "I say it again. Ye're a haard man."

"This is a hard planet, Angus, and it is a hard trail we travel getting here. It is no place for weakness of any kind——"

"Aye, but——"

"I said to forget it, Angus," Sparks interrupted. "My father was a hard man, too. If he had not been, he would not have been what he was—the first human to set foot on Mars. I know very well what he was called. 'Old find-a-way-or-make-one Avery.' 'Old damn the risk; we're going through.' Whenever anything went wrong—and everything must have gone wrong on that first trip—he had a saying, 'For every evil, nature provides a cure. But she doesn't hand you that cure on a silver platter. You've got to find it yourself, or die.' He hated any show of sentiment any

weakness of any kind. Captain Frome told me my father was dead in exactly the way he would have wished the news to reach me. As to his death, he died as he would have wished, fighting the unknown. He is buried where he would have wished to be—in the sand of Mars."

Silence followed the raido operator's outburst, the awkward silence of men who want to show their sympathy and can't find the words.

"I was on that first trip with him," said McIlrath. "I learned to know him. Ye're his own true son."

"Sorry," Sparks answered. "I didn't mean to blow off steam that way He wouldn't have liked it. But he was always sort of a god to me, and"—his lips tightened "something killed him."

The central door opened. The cook stood there. "Come and get it," he said, "or I'll throw it away."

"Come on," said Sparks bitterly. "Let's go eat."

When they left the room the jewel was lying on the table where Orsatti had been examining it.

When they returned it was gone.

They searched the ship for it. They didn't find it. They didn't even find a tiny opening in the inner hull down near the floor, a hole that looked as if a rivet might have dropped out of it. The hole was no larger than a lead pencil, which was probably why they missed it. There was another tiny opening in the outer shell of the ship.

The jewel was gone.

"Gentlemen," said Captain Frome, "tonight we will take turns standing guard."

But nothing happened that night. No intruder tried to gain entrance to the ship. The wind of Mars, blowing the dry dust of the red planet, whimpered softly around the vessel. There was no other sound.

But what happened the next day made them forget, temporarily at least, all about the jewel that had disappeared so mysteriously.

Early in the morning Sutter and Orsatti went out to continue their investigation of the city. Frome remained in the ship, writing up a complete report. McIlrath, under orders from Frome, had gone to the vessel of the first expedition, to examine the engines. He had returned dourly shaking his head. The engines were dead. He had reported to Frome that he was unable to determine the cause of their failure, and muttering had gone back to his own engine room.

Sparks, on lookout duty at the port, saw the man coming. It was Sutter. He was running.

"We've found them!" Sutter gasped as he came through the inner door of the lock. "The inhabitants of Mars. In a cavern under the city. You remember that door where all the jewels were piled? We shovelled them out of the way and opened it. The Martians are down below. Frozen asleep," he gasped in explanation.

"Then they're alive?" Frome snapped.

"No. Not yet. But they can be awakened, I think. Orsatti says they can and he ought to know. He's down there now." The archaeologist was so excited he could not speak coherently.

Sparks knew what this find meant to Sutter. It meant a lot to all of them. One of the big reasons why men had been so anxious to blaze a trail across space to Mars had been to meet the inhabitants of the planet.

Photographs taken in 1939 had showed conclusively that the canals of Mars were artificial. Therefore there was life on the sister world across the void.

But when they reached the planet, they hadn't found the men of Mars. Instead they had found desolation and dust and sand. And death. Deserted cities.

If Sutter was right, this was the big moment in the history of the exploration of Mars. Even the arrival of the first spaceship from Earth was not as important as this discovery. His heart leaped at the thought. The long lost inhabitants of Mars had been found!

Frome began jerking on heavy clothing. "Get into your clothes, lad," he barked, "and call Angus. He came here with the first ship and he deserves to be present when we awaken one of these Martians."

Sparks, diving toward the engine room, realised that Frome had given no reason for taking him along. He had said that Angus deserved to be present. The old engineer did. He had suffered all the privations of the pioneer explorers of this planet. He had earned a chance to be present at the historict moment when one of the men of Mars was awakened.

But Sparks knew why Frome was taking him. He hadn't earned his chance. Someone else, who couldn't be present, had earned it for him.

He was only a youth, barely past twenty. Only his superb knowledge of radio equipment had got him a place with the Martian explorers. His father had not opposed his coming. Nor had he helped his son secure the appointment. He had said, "The fact that I am commander of the men exploring Mars, will make no difference so far as you are concerned. You will suffer every hardship that anyone else suffers, you will take every risk. You will eat the same food, sleep in the same hard bunks, drink the same synthesised water, and stand strictly on your own feet. You will ask no favors and you will obey orders implicitly, no matter what they are."

Richard Avery had been a hard man. But he had been a man.

Only Shorty Adams was left to guard the ship. Frome gave him strict orders to be on the lookout.

Sutter led them at a dog trot across the silent, deserted city to a low building that had only one door. Ruby crystals were scattered all around the door where he and Orsatti had shoved them out of the way. Sutter dived into the dark opening and as the others followed, Sparks saw how heavy that door was. It was at least a foot thick and the outer surface was heavily pitted by rust.

Orsatti waited for them down below. "They're here all right," he said. "Each of these cells has a Martian in it. They're in frozen sleep, too. No doubt about it."

The chamber was not large. It had been carved out of solid rock and it had perhaps five hundred coffinlike cells in it. Each receptacle was fitted with a glass top.

"I waited for your permission to open one of these receptacles, Captain Frome," Orsatti continued. "Pending your arrival, I took the liberty of removing the seals from one of the caskets. It's ready to open. Shall I go ahead?"

Frome hesitated. He peered through the glass top, studied the creature that lay within.

"Are you certain these people are really in frozen sleep?" he asked.

"Positive of it. Feel the tempera-

ture down here. It's perfect for frozen sleep. That's why this city was in perfect order, the tools put away in grease, the houses closed and locked. These people expected to return to their city when they awakened."

"Well," said Frome slowly, "you may— What's that, Angus?"

McIlrath had stood apart from the others. He had taken a flashlight and poked carefully around the cavern, nosing down the aisles between the receptacles like a wary old hound scenting the presence of danger. Now he spoke.

"I'm thinking that these people had a reason for putting themselves into suspended animation. They didn't come down here and hide away in this gloomy hole for no cause. I don't know what their reason was, but it could have been the last desperate expedient of a race fleeing from some deadly and implacable enemy. If this is true, we had best consider well our action in awakening them."

A little stir of uneasiness ran through the group. Orsatti blinked owlishly. Sutter protested inarticulately.

"Have you seen anything that you might consider an enemy strong enough to force the Martians to resort to frozen sleep to escape it?" Frome questioned.

"I have not that."

"But perhaps their food supply gave out," Sutter protested. "The water supply has been dwindling on this planet for ages. Perhaps a protracted period of drought left them with no choice except frozen sleep or starvation. They chose suspended animation hoping that when they awakened, climatic conditions would be better. Perhaps they had alternate cycles of drought and meagre rainfall. This was the way they escaped the drought."

The old Scot shook his head. "Ye may be right. Perhaps these Martians fled from drought. But I remember we came here to rescue three men. We found them dead. One of them had fled from their ship. What he fled from we do not know. But we do know that this race was also fleeing from something."

Again the little stir of uneasiness came. Was the old Scot sensing something that he could not put into words?

Sutter was an archaeologist. He had spent years digging into the ruins of Mars. He would not be balked now. "This is superstitious nonsense!"

"It may be that," McIlrath answered. "I think I knew the three men who died here fairly well. There was little superstition in them. And I know very well indeed that uranium fission engines are not superstitious. But both the men and the engines are dead. You cannot account for that by superstition."

Sutter and Orsatti turned to Frome and began to plead with him to permit the opening of one of the receptacles.

Frome considered his decision. "The whole purpose of our exploration of this planet has been to discover the Martians. Having found them, if we fail to awaken them, our purpose is defeated. Therefore you may open one of the receptacles."

Sutter and Orsatti wasted no time. Frome turned to McIlrath. "I'm sorry, Angus. If you had had a definite reason, we could have waited."

"Aye, captain," McIlrath answered.

Sparks Avery watched. He had taken no part in the conversation. Now, in spite of the dry, frigid air, globules of sweat began to form on his forehead. He brushed them away. Now and again his eyes strayed to the heavy pistol that hung at Frome's hip. Frome had opened the flap and loosened the pistol in its holster.

There was a jewel on the floor near the end of the ramp that led downward. It glittered evilly in the sunlight that was beginning to shine into the cavern.

It seemed to the radio operator that only minutes passed before Orsatti had opened the receptacle. Very gently he and Sutter lifted out its occupant.

They laid him on the floor, this man of Mars. The men from Earth clustered about him. He was not quite five feet tall, had a huge chest, and long, spindly arms. He was clad in a soft leather garment and around his waist was a metal belt from which a pouch and a short dagger hung.

"In minutes, he will awaken," Orsatti whispered.

The others were silent. Sparks caught the suppressed tension of that moment. He had been on Mars less than six months, but he had absorbed from his father the lure of the red planet, the vast mystery of it. Now the mystery would be solved. Now Mars would have a voice. Now the red deserts would give up their secrets, now the deserted cities would reveal what had happened in them.

The Martian stirred. A little finger moved, an arm twisted. His chest heaved. The soft sigh of air through long unused vocal chords echoed through the cavern.

"He's awakening," Sutter whispered. "Heavens! What will he say? What will he do? What will he think? How amazed he will be to see us, strangers from another world, bending over him!"

As they watched, the chest movement of the Martian became more regular. The panting heaves that had marked his first gasping efforts for air smoothed into an even rhythm. Spasmodic twitching fluttered his throat.

"Look!" the archaeologist's tense voice rang out. "His eyes are opening."

They were brown, an agate-brown. They were filmed and out of focus.

"Easy, old fellow," Sutter whispered. "Here. I'll help you sit up." He slipped an arm under the Martian's shoulder.

The Martian glanced at Sutter, and looked away. The film was gone from his eyes. They were in focus now.

Sparks caught his breath. What he had seen was incredible.

The Martian had only glanced at Sutter. Then he looked away. His eyes went to the faces of the others. But he only glanced at them, too, glanced casually at them, as if they were of no importance.

Awakening from the sleep of ages, finding himself the captive of a race that obviously did not belong to Mars, he found them not worthy of a second glance.

What was wrong? Couldn't the Martian see yet? Was he blind?

Or, no matter how important were these giants who were bending over, was there something that was more important?

The Martian had large, pointed ears, which he could move at will. He twitched them backward, like a cat listening for a sound behind him.

He absolutely ignored the Earthmen. His ears flipped forward, toward the open doorway through which the sun was shining. He listened. There was no sound. He moved his head from side to side, his ears questing for some sound in the cold dry air, his eyes alert for movement.

Sparks found himself listening, too. He heard nothing. But the Martian seemed to hear something. His ears were flipped forward, with the intentness of a cat that has heard the growl of a dangerous dog. But he was no longer listening. He was looking. He saw something. The agate-brown eyes were fixed with terrible intentness on an object near the doorway.

Fear crept over his face, a horror and a terror that was akin to madness. He jerked himself free from Sutter's arms. The archaeologist tried to hold him. He wrenched himself free. His hand darted to the dagger at his belt.

It rose evilly upward—and sank in the Martian's throat!

He screeched. The screech died in a gurgle. He fell forward on his face, and a cloud of dry dust puffed from under his dead body.

In the shocked, stunned silence Sutter hoarsely gasped. "We scared him. He saw us, and committed suicide."

"No!" Sparks jerked out. "He saw us all right, but we didn't scare him. He didn't pay any attention to us. There's the thing that scared him!"

He pointed toward the doorway where the ruby jewel glinted in the sunlight. "That's what he saw. That thing. It scared him so badly that he committed suicide." He started to approach the jewel.

"Drop it!" McIlrath's voice rang out. "Don't touch that thing."

Sparks leaped away.

"The lad's right," Angus continued. "I was watching. The Martian paid us no heed. It was yon jewel that scared him."

"But that's preposterous!" Sutter protested. "That jewel is harmless. We'll open another receptacle, revive another Martian."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," Frome snapped. "Preposterous or not, this demands a full investigation. When the first Martian we find commits suicide as soon as we awaken him, I'm going to know why he did it before we awaken another one. Sutter, you and Orsatti pick up his body. We'll take it to the ship, make a complete report to our main base, and ask that a large expedition be sent here. Angus, you lead the way. Sparks, you follow him. I'll bring up the rear."

He jerked the pistol from its holster. The click as he slipped a cartridge into the chamber was loud in the silent vault. Overruling Sutter's objections, he ordered them from the vault. They obeyed him. As he walked up the incline, he picked up the jewel and swiftly thrust it into his knapsack. He closed the door of the cavern as they left.

In the minds of each of them was a single question: Why did the Martian commit suicide? Why had that jewel scared him so badly. Was death, silent and invisible, here in this haunted city? Had the Martians fled from death?

When they reached the ship they found that death was there ahead of them. They found Shorty Adams curled up under the water cooler in his own galley.

He was dead.

Sparks found him, and called the others. Frome got there first. His

examination of the body was swift, but thorough. "This happened almost as soon as we left the ship. There is no wound on his body, no sign to show the cause of death. But his face is stamped with the same agony that was on the faces of the first three."

Methodically he began to search the galley. From an open bin he pulled another jewel.

Frome's face seemed to freeze. He was still wearing the heavy gloves that are standard equipment in the open of Mars. Handling the jewel gingerly, he raised it up to the level of his eyes, squinted at it. Shaking his head, he said, "I can't tell whether it is the same one we brought into the ship last night."

"Do you think, while we were at dinner, Adams slipped into the other room and stole it?" Sutter asked.

"That is not true," said McIlrath flatly.

"How do you know it isn't? It could be true."

"I knew Adams," the old Scot said. "He was no thief."

"But how did it get out of the ship, or where was it hidden? Are you suggesting it moved or its own accord?" Sutter persisted.

"Enough," Frome interrupted decisively. "Something killed him. I am not prepared to say this jewel was responsible for his death. I'm not prepared to say it wasn't. But I am saying this: We're going to our main base immediately, where complete laboratory facilities are available, and we're going to find out what these damned things really are. Angus, prepare your engines for an immediate take-off. Sparks," he barked, "warm up your transmitter and make contact with our main base immediately. Report that we are coming in. Get moving."

Sparks was already racing toward the bow of the ship. As he slid into the seat before the transmitter, he saw, out of the corner of his eyes, the body of the dead Martian where Sutter and Orsatti had dropped it when they entered the ship. The dagger was still sticking from his throat.

The sight sent a touch of eerie chill up his spine. If he had needed anything to remind him that some incredible form of death lurked very near, the sight of the dagger protruding from the Martian provided it.

He snapped the switches, reached automatically for the microphone. When no transformer hum came he snapped the switches again. He was still working with them when Frome entered the room.

"I regret to report," he said, "that our transmitter is dead. The power seems to have failed."

Frome stopped in midstride. He would have halted like that if somebody had suddenly pulled a gun on him. "What's that?"

As Sparks repeated the words, Sutter and Orsatti entered the room.

"But the power for our radio transmitter is drawn from our main engines," Frome whispered. Then he spun on his heel, brushed past Orsatti and Sutter, and was gone.

"What's going on?" Orsatti asked bewilderedly.

"I have a hunch I know," Sparks answered. He pounded after the captain. When he reached the engine room he needed only a glance to see that his worst fear had come true.

"But the engines can't be dead," Frome was saying vehemently. "They

can't be. It's impossible for uranium fission engines to fail."

"I know it's impossible," the old engineer replied stubbornly, "hut I'm telling you it's happened anyhow."

Captain Frome faced the tense little group. "Gentlemen," he said, "I need not remind you that we are face to face with a new and unknown form of death. Night is coming. We are without power to move the ship or to operate our radio apparatus. There are hundreds of miles of dry, deadly deserts surrounding this city, deserts which we could not hope to cross on foot. We have food and water for two weeks. Unquestionably, when our main base cannot raise us by radio, they will send a rescue ship, but it will be a week before a rescue expedition can reach us. If we are to be numbered among the living when it arrives, the price we will pay for our lives is constant vigilance. Pistols will be issued to all of you. Keep them ready at all times."

He paused and looked at the engineer. "Angus, you and Sparks will make every effort to determine the cause of our engine failure and to correct it. Sutter, you will do me a great favor if you will take charge of the galley. Orsatti, I would like you to help me."

"Certainly. What are we to do?"

"We are going to find out what these damned things really are," Frome answered. He pointed to the two jewels. The biochemist paled.

Working on the engines, it was obvious that the old engineer was trying to conceal his fears. To all questions he returned the same answer, a perturbed shake of the head. "I dinna know, lad. It is as if the uranium has lost its power to explode."

"But it hasn't been touched. The seals are in place. If anyone had tampered with it, he would have left marks behind him."

"I know that, lad. And I am remembering that there were no marks on the bodies of the dead men, either."

"But what could have done it?"

"I dinna know, lad. But we must remember this is Mars. There are strange things here on this planet, things that no man can guess. The Martian committed suicide. That was strange. And those ruby jewels are very strange."

"But why were our engines stopped? Were we deliberately marooned here?"

"We cannot begin to guess at motivations," McIlrath replied uneasily. "This is not Earth. The creatures of this planet may have entirely different reasons for their acts than we have."

Then the first shot came. **Bang!** The second one came right behind it.

Somebody was using a gun. His first shot had missed. But he had taken dead aim to make certain the second one did not miss.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Three more shots followed closely on the heels of the second. Whoever was using the gun had missed with the second shot. Now he was emptying the weapon at a charging enemy.

"It's in the main control room," Sparks said. "Come on."

Yanking his pistol from its holster, he raced down the corridor. McIlrath came right behind him. They almost ran over Sutter as he came out of the galley, a gun in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other. The archaeologist brought up the rear.

Sparks kicked open the door.

Orsatti lay on the floor. Sparks did

not need to see the sick agony on his face to know Orsatti was probably dead or dying.

Frome was alive. He stood stiffly erect, his feet wide apart, taking aim with his pistol. Flame lanced from the muzzle and the sharp thunder of the shot smashed through the room.

He yanked the trigger again and the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. With a single motion of his arm he threw the weapon at the thing coming at him.

The sight paralyzed the radio operator. What he saw—was impossible! The thing that moved toward Frome was a two-foot ball of reddish gas. A globe of swirling gas, lit with a baleful red brilliance. The thing glittered with microscopic pinpoints of light. It made a sound as it moved, a high-pitched note like the whine of a distant motor generator.

There were two of the gas balls. One of them was darting towards Frome. The other was down on the floor, on Orsatti's body, and the whine coming from it held a gloating note, like a ghoul feeding.

Everything happened in split seconds. The gas ball streaked toward Frome. A thundering explosion smashed Sparks' eardrums. He saw a pistol poked past him and he knew that McIlrath was firing over his shoulder. He jerked up his own gun and the two pistols spat a salvo.

The gas ball flinched as the bullets hit it, wavered and dodged.

"That's the medicine," Sparks shouted. "Hot lead." He fired again.

Before the third shot had left his gun, he knew the weapon was useless. The gas ball flinched as the slugs hit it, but they passed through it unimpeded. It struck Frome on the chest, clung to him like a leech. His hands jerked up to tear it away, but as it touched him his whole body seemed to be paralyzed, and his arms fell limply. A look of startled agony writhed over his face. His eyes popped open in sudden horror. He screamed and slumped to the floor.

As he fell, he saw the radio operator standing in the doorway.

"Close that door," he gasped. "Barricade yourself behind it."

Sparks did not move to obey him.

"Save yourselves," the weak words came. "Never mind us. We're done for." The voice found strength in some hidden sources and Captain Frome rasped out his final command. "That's an order. Obey it."

He was the captain. His authority was final.

"Obey it, hell!" Sparks snarled. He leaped into the room, McIlrath and Sutter right behind him.

What happened next was always afterward a blur in Sparks' mind. As a boy he had fought bumblebees in the meadows of Earth. This was something like fighting bumblebees, except that this bee was deadly. Slapping, slugging at the reddish mass of gas on Frome's chest, they tried to tear it loose. To touch it sent jarring needles of pain up their arms. Their hand smashed through it. It swirled and re-formed.

But when the fight was over, Captain Frome was on one side of the door and a reddish mass of gas was singing angrily on the other.

And Sparks was turning back to the door. When he came out the second time, he had Orsatti's body in his arms. He had enough strength left to lay the biochemist down. Then his legs buckled under him and he collapsed.

When he recovered consciousness

the old engineer was dribbling whisky into his mouth. He tried to sit up but McIlrath pushed him back.

"Lie still, lad, until ye get your strength back."

"But those gas balls."

"Lie still and I'll tell you what we've decided about them."

"But where are they?"

"Forward in the control room whining to each other. Captain Frome thinks he has found out what they are."

"Captain Frome? How is he?"

"Weak as a kitten, but we think he'll live. He says the gas balls came from the ruby jewels, that while he and Orsatti were working with the crystals they suddenly turned to gas right before their eyes——"

"But that's impossible."

The old Scot shook his head. "Captain Frome says the gas balls and the crystals are two different forms of the same life species. He thinks they are similar to the cocoon and the butterfly that we know back on Earth. The crystal is the cocoon stage. The ball of gas is the butterfly stage. He says he thinks they live on radiant energy, and that they attack our engines and us for the same reason."

"But——" Sparks choked off his protest. Frome was a thoroughly capable physicist. And he was not given to idle statements. If he made a statement, he had a good reason to back it up. "What connection is there between our engines and us?"

"There is this connection, lad. The source of power in our engines is the radioactivity of the uranium atom. The source of the energy that keeps the human heart beating is the element potassium, which is slightly radioactive. If you remove the uranium from our engines, they won't generate power. If you remove the potassium from our bodies, our heart stops beating."

"But the uranium was not removed from our engines, and the bodies of the dead men show no marks of any kind. How was the potassium removed without leaving a mark?"

"It is not the uranium or the potassium that is removed. Captain Frome says these gas balls live on the radioactive emanations, the alpha, beta, and gamma rays, discharged by these elements, leaving them inert. Just as a leech sucks blood, they suck the radioactive discharges. Are you feeling better now, lad?"

Sparks sat up. A wave of dizziness sent his head spinning, but he forced himself to his feet and walked over to where Captain Frome lay on the floor. Frome's eyes were closed and he was breathing in slow, gasping sobs.

Sutter was bending over Frome. "His heart is barely beating," the archaeologist said. "Those damned things almost sucked the life out of him."

Sparks said nothing. He walked to the nearest port and looked out. Swift dusk was falling over Mars. Sharp shadows were creeping over the city. Blobs of darkness were huddling behind the buildings. Night was coming over this city where for centuries red death had patiently waited for the last of the Martians to awaken.

The men of Mars had not taken refuge in frozen sleep to escape a drought cycle. They had fled from a deadly enemy. The Martian had committed suicide when he saw that jewel glittering in the sunlight at the entrance to the cavern. He had known what it was. He had preferred to die by his own hand rather than face a more agonizing death.

A movement in the shadows caught his eye. He looked again, to make certain he had not been mistaken. Then he saw what it was—a ball of red gas drifting along a foot or so above the sand. It came out of the shadow and moved directly toward the ship.

Another dead butterfly had emerged, another cocoon had burst.

But they were safe. The stout steel hull of the ship would protect them until a rescue expedition could arrive. They had plenty of food and water. Even if a thousand cocoons released their drifting death, they could not get through the walls of the ship.

Someone breathed heavily behind him. Turning, Sparks saw Angus looking out over his shoulder. The old engineer squinted at the drifting ball of gas. "Another one? I was afraid there would be others. Those two behind that door in the control room have been squealing as if they were calling to others of their kind."

"Do you think they can call others?"

"I dinna know, lad. Back on Earth the moths do it and I doubt if yon red devil came here because of idle curiosity."

The radio operator followed the red monstrosity as it drifted out of sight. He shivered, and said, "Well, we're safe here."

"About that, I dinna know either," McIlrath answered, shaking his head.

It was not so much what he said but the way he said it that sent a sudden chill to the radio operator's heart. But Angus refused to answer his questions. Instead the engineer led him down the corridor to the control room. The door was still blocked. It was a stout sheet of aluminium alloy.

Putty had been plastered around the cracks.

"While you were still unconscious," McIlrath explained, "those devils began to ooze through the cracks between the edges of the door and the facing. We stopped them up with a bit of putty, but——"

"But what!" Sparks exploded. "You surely don't think they can come through the door?"

"I think they can't, lad," the old Scot answered, "but I remember that door the Martians built to seal their cavern. It was at least a foot thick. But the outer surface was pitted with holes that were almost six inches deep, as if something had tried to eat its way through the barrier, and had failed. It wasn't rust, either, for in this cursed dry desert metal will scarcely rust. So something else must have eaten those holes in that door, and the only thing that could have done——"

He broke off to stare in slowly mounting horror at the door they were facing. At the same instant Sparks saw what was happening.

A tiny smudge had appeared on the grey surface. It looked a little like a drop of acid. It was about the size of a dime, and it was growing in size. As it grew it turned distinctly reddish.

"They are eating their way through the door!" Sparks whispered. He started to slap at the reddish spot but McIlrath knocked his hand away. The engineer seized a wad of putty from the floor and slapped it over the spot. It ceased growing. On the other side of the door an angry whine sounded. "Damn you," he grunted. "That stops you this time."

"Yes, but for how long?" Sparks whispered.

McIlrath didn't answer.

Sutter came running through the corridor. "I just wanted to tell you," he panted. "There are a lot of those things outside. They're doing something to the glass in the portholes and——"

They didn't wait for him to finish but raced back to the stern of the ship. A glance showed that the archaeologist was right. Dozens of blobs of glistening gas floated over the ship A few were clamped over the glass of the ports. Under the action of some acid they secreted, it was flaking away.

Nobody said anything, but each knew that doom was coming toward them. Slowly but surely the glass in the ports would be disintegrated If they closed the ports with metal, the monstrosities would eat through the metal. There was no place in the ship that promised safety, with the possible exception of the cook's galley, which was in the heart of the ship and protected by metal barriers on all sides. In time even those barriers would fall.

"There's got to be some way to whip those devils," Sparks grated.

Sutter was twitching as if he bad the palsy.

Only the old engineer was calm and he spread his hands in a hopeless gesture. "Yes, lad, there probably is But guns didn't work——"

"Sparks," a weak voice whispered. The radio operator jerked around to see who was calling him. He saw Captain Frome The captain had spoken. "What's happening?"

The radio man told him. Frome sighed. "I wish I could suggest something. But I can't. Too weak even to think. So I'm turning everything over to you, lad——"

"To me!"

"Yes. I ought to put you under arrest . . . for disobeying me . . when I told you to save yourself. Instead I'm putting you in charge of the remnants of this expedition. I'm not doing this just because you showed initiative and daring . when you saved my life . but because you're old 'Find-a-way-or-make-one' Avery's son. He never let anything stop him. And you're his son. You'll get us out of this mess . if anybody can."

The radio man's mind was reeling Captain Frome was telling him that he was the boss. "But what about McIlrath and Sutter? Will they——"

"I think they will. But let them answer for tbemselves."

Sutter nodded nervously. "I don't care what's done as long as we get out of here alive."

McIlrath said simply. "I followed your father, lad. You're his own true son. I will not hesitate to follow you."

The surge of exultation that leaped up in Sparks was drowned in the recognition of his new responsibility Before. he had been taking orders. Now be was giving them. He well knew that Frome had had another reason for designating him as acting captain Sutter and McIlrath were both too old to respond quickly in an emergency He was young, his reactions timed to split seconds. And if they were to escape alive, they had to have a leader who could react instantly

He stood up 'We'll carry Captain Frome into the galley. It's the best protected spot in the ship. We'll take all our emergency equipment in there We'll plug the porthole with putty. And after that——" But he didn't finish the sentence. He knew the metal walls of the galley would yield in time.

After they had carried everything to the galley, Sparks came back to the stern. McIlrath followed him. "What are ye planning to do, lad?" he asked quietly.

"What makes you think I'm planning anything?" Sparks answered sharply.

"Ye've got the same quiet ferocity in your eyes that your father had. When he was planning something dangerous, and didn't intend to tell anybody about it, he looked just exactly like you do now."

"Yeah?" Sparks rasped. "Well, I am planning something, but you can't stop me. You heard what Frome said. I'm in charge now."

The engineer's eyes did not falter "Ye needn't remind me of that, lad. I'm not trying to stop you But if I know what it is you're doing, I might be able to help you."

"Oh!" the radio man answered. "I am planning something. I didn't tell you because I was afraid you might kick about it—think it was too dangerous. But it's the only way I can see for us to have even a chance to get out of here alive."

"And what is that, lad?" McIlrath asked quietly.

"You remember my father had a saying," Sparks answered. " 'For every evil, nature provides a virtue. For every poison there's an antidote. For every disease, there's a cure—somewhere—' There is something that will whip these gas balls, something that will destroy them They've got a weakness, somewhere!"

"I also remember the rest of that saying. Nature provides a way to cure everything that goes wrong. **But she doesn't hand you that cure on a silver platter. You've got to find it yourself!** I don't doubt there's a way to whip these red devils, but, lad, how are we going to find it in the few hours we've got left? The old engineer's face was wrinkled into a frown of pleading perplexity.

"By going to the only possible source of information, the Martians themselves. They fought these damned things for centuries. If anybody knows what to do to lick 'em, the Martians do," Sparks answered.

"But they fought and lost," McIlrath protested. "They hid away in a hole. If they had known how to whip their enemy, they would have done it."

The radio man's youthful face clouded. "I've thought of that," he said desperately. "But maybe they ran out of ammunition to fight with. The fact that they put their city in order shows they expected these damned radium suckers to be gone when they awakened. Anyhow, they're our only hope. We can either take a chance that they will know how to whip these devils, or we can sit here and die waiting. I'm damned if I'm going to sit here and wait for one of those things to suck the life out of me. I'm going after one of those Martians. And this one," he finished grimly, "won't commit suicide before we get a chance to talk to him."

"But, lad——"

"But, hell!" Sparks snarled. "I'm going."

He thought the engineer meant to protest his going because he would have to run the gauntlet of the growing number of gas balls outside. But McIlrath had no such intention. The old Scot knew very well that death lurked outside, but the threat of death had never stopped Richard Avery. Nor would it stop his son. It wouldn't stop McIlrath either. Very calmly he insisted on going along.

"Hell, no," Sparks rasped. Then his voice softened. "I mean, Angus, you had better stay here and help me through the emergency lock when I come back."

"Aye, lad," McIlrath answered. "I'll be waiting for you."

Sparks waited until deep darkness had fallen. Then he slipped through the emergency lock.

A globe of witchfire floated outside the lock. Sparks eyed it. All over his body he felt his skin writhe. What if one of those things caught him? He knew the answer to that. His heart would stop beating, just as Orsatti's heart had stopped, just as

He watched the gas ball. It floated away toward the stern of the ship. He slipped to the sand and dropped on his face, crawling up against the hull. A thin whine sounded as another of the creatures passed. Or perhaps it was the same one. Perhaps it had sensed his presence and had returned. He held his breath. Death went on by.

He waited until everything was clear and then dashed across the sand. Panting for breath in the thin, dry air, he reached the shelter of the buildings—and saw a luminosity coming toward him.

He dived headfirst into the sand. Dust rose in choking clouds. The gas ball passed. He lay still, fighting for breath. The dust irritated his nostrils. He began to worm his way forward.

Two hours later he was back at the ship, a bound-and-gagged Martian over his shoulder. He took one look at the vessel, and his heart sank. It was surrounded by hundreds of balls of fire mist. Swirling over the hull, squirming against the ports, eating their way through to the food that lay inside. Hundreds of them. And others were coming.

Had they already penetrated the hull?

He lay down flat on his face and began to worm his way across the open space, the Martian still over his shoulder. The Martian had seen the gas balls. He was whimpering like a badly frightened child.

Would he reach the ship? Or would they see him and dart at him in a swarming cloud? He was now only ten feet from the flier. A quick dash would take him to the lock. He took a deep breath, and lifted himself for the dash.

Then it happened. A gas ball, passing over him, suddenly whined augrily, and looped back toward him, hovering over him like a buzzard investigating carrion. Other luminosities, attracted by the action of the first one, came swirling downward.

They had discovered him.

It was the end. He didn't have a chance in a million. The gas balls were darting at him from all directions. He leaped to his feet, tried to race toward the emergency lock, knowing he couldn't make it.

He tripped and fell. Everything went black. Acid seemed to bite at his nose. He couldn't see. Dimly he wondered—did death come like this, a sudden rushing blackness? He felt no pain.

Something touched him. He screamed. A sharp voice said, "This way, lad."

Sparks gulped in thankfulness. McIlrath! He knew now what had happened. The engineer had been watching from the lock, a smoke projector ready. That rushing wave of blackness was smoke. Smoke! He could hear the gas balls whining as they

groped through it. McIlrath guided him to the lock. The outer door clanged shut hehind them.

In all his life Sparks had never heen so miserable. When he had succeeded in returning to the ship with the Martian, he had thought they now had a chance to live. Instead he had learned that they were doomed. Doomed!

Two hours had passed since he returned. They were all in the cramped galley. Death was eating at the walls around them, death that now was only minutes off.

"I tried to tell you when you left, lad," McIlrath said softly, "but you thought I was trying to keep you from going, and wouldn't listen."

"I know," Sparks nodded glumly, "but, hell, I didn't think about this. All I could think was that maybe the Martians knew some way to fight these devils."

"I know, lad," McIlrath answered. "Don't be feeling bad about it. 'Twas a brave thing that ye did. And maybe they do know some way——"

"Yeah," Sparks answered gloomily "Maybe they do."

He glanced across the galley at the Martian. He was alive all right Scared half to death hut alive. He was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, his arms and legs bound. His bright, fear-filled eyes darted restlessly over the room. Occasionally he said something in a high, singsong tone of voice. He knew what was eating through the walls of the ship, and he might know something to do about it. Every time he spoke he might be telling them how to whip the radium suckers.

The trouhle was—they couldn't understand what he said.

The men of Earth and the men of Mars had met, under desperate circumstances with the future of the planet depending on them, and they couldn't understand each other The languages were different. John Orms, language expert, had spent eleven years trying to crack the written Martian language, and had failed.

In time, now that they had found a Martian, they would be able to understand each other. But there wasn't time.

Seconds ticked away into nothingness. A red blot appeared on the wall of the galley. McIlrath slapped a wad of putty over it, and looked down at the diminishing supply. There was very little putty left.

Sutter twitched nervously. McIlrath calmly sat down. Sparks glowered at the Martian. To have safety so near, and yet so far away. It was maddening!

Frome, lying on the floor, tried to sit up and fell hack. "Could I," he whispered, "have a drink of water?"

They had plenty of water. Sparks drew a cupful from the cooler. The eyes of the Martian followed him as he lifted Frome to a sitting position. The captain drank. "Any luck, lad?" he said weakly.

"No," Sparks answered, "but we're not finished yet. There's some way to lick these damned things and I know it." He rose to his feet. He was lying to himself, trying to lie to them. They were finished. And when the rescue expedition came after them, as it certainly would, it would be finished, too. The bones of men would lie with the hones of Martians in the dry deserts, in the dust of the deserted cities. The exploration of the planet, so bravely begun, might well end here. The labor of the men who had fought space to reach Mars, the daring of the pioneers who had braved the deserts, would have resulted only in death.

Then Sutter screamed, an inarticulate screech, the yell of a man who has seen death coming, and knows he cannot stop it.

A red dot, the size of the end of a lead pencil, had appeared on the outer wall. It began to grow in size.

Slowly the archaeologist slumped to the floor. He had fainted. The pressure had got too much for him. They let him lie. Death would come easier if he did not know it was coming.

The red dot grew. The galley was

silent. In the silence men breathed heavily.

The Martian screeched. Another red dot had appeared on the wall.

"Damn you, shut up!" Sparks rasped. "We're in the same boat——"

He broke off to stare at the Martian. A sudden savage hope sent his heart pounding.

The Martian seemed to be having a fit. He was twisting and turning and trying to free himself from his bonds. His eyes were darting continuously from the two men to another object in the room. He looked like a dog trying to warn his master that a grizzly bear is lurking on the trail ahead. And like a dog he could only tell what he knew by howling and begging with his eyes.

"He's trying to tell us something," Sparks whispered tensely. He leaped across the galley and cut the ropes that bound the native. The Martian struggled to his feet. He leaped across the room toward—Sparks caught his breath—the water cooler. He drew a cupful of the liquid, turned and splashed it across the red dots growing on the wall.

Something hissed like an angry snake. Hissed and drew away. The dots stopped growing.

"Water," Sparks gulped. "The one thing this damned planet has always needed and never had. Water! Those damned gas balls have evolved in a desert. They can't stand water; it kills them. Sutter was right. The Martians went into frozen sleep because their water supply had given out. The answer was right under our eyes all the time. The very dust that choked us should have told us what to do."

He was screaming now. "There's always a cure for every evil. But you've got to find that cure. And we've found it. Take that, damn you! And that."

He was splashing water on the walls, wetting them down. McIlrath and the Martian were helping him. The putty began to slip and fall away. Luminosities tried to surge through the holes. When water struck them, they sizzled like a skillet full of hot grease, burst into steam, and steaming died.

Two Earthmen and a Martian fought side by side, and they used as a weapon the one thing of which Mars for centuries had never had enough—water.

When the rescue ship came knifing down out of the sky, the surprised captain found four weary, happy Earthmen to greet him. Two of them supported the man he recognized as captain of this ill-fated expedition. But when he came to greet Frome, it was Sparks who stepped forward, and gravely saluted.

"Avery, sir, acting captain of the rescue ship Kepler, reporting."

The puzzled captain acknowledged his salute. They told him what had happened. "I get that," he said. "You did a swell job. But," he gestured toward the other group. "Who are these?"

"The men of Mars," Sparks announced. "We've found them."

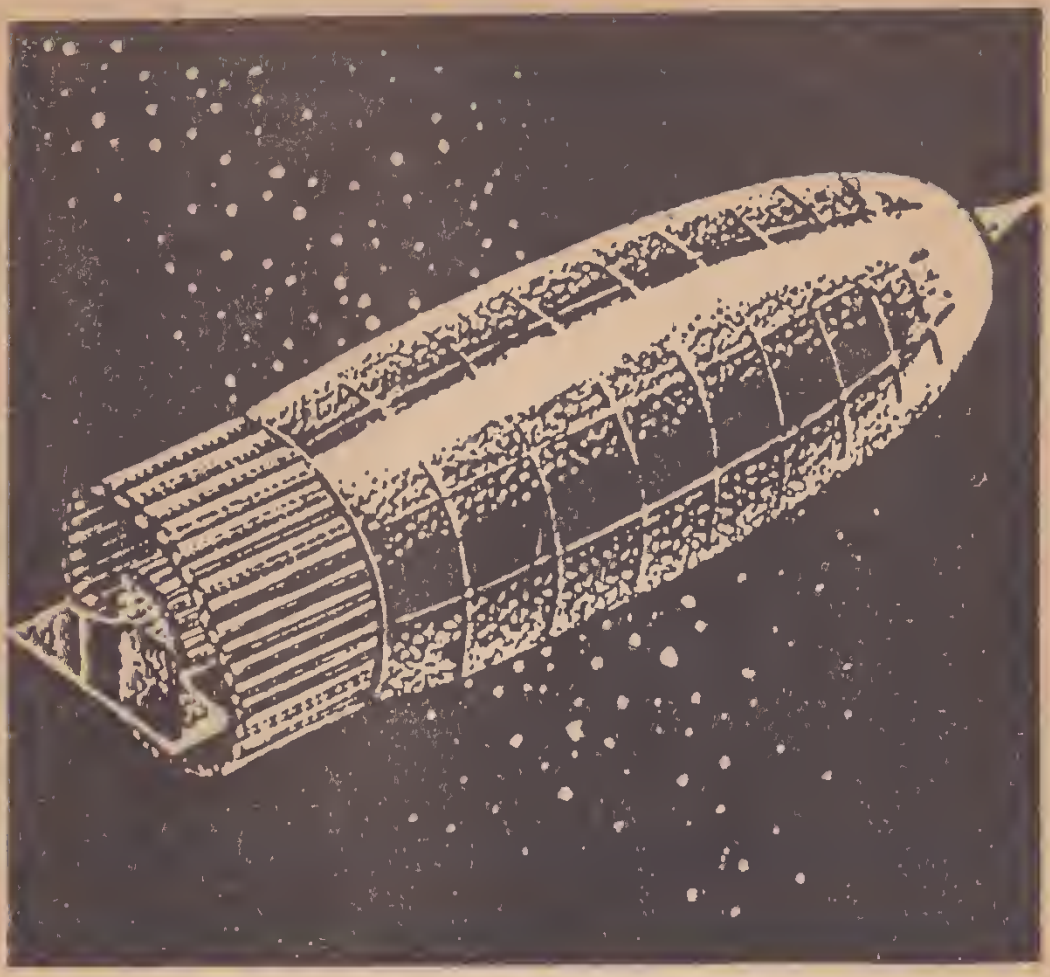
They had awakened the Martians from their frozen sleep. They stood in a large group apart from the Earthmen.

"But what's the matter with them?" the captain asked. "What are they acting like that for?"

The Martians were waving their hands in the air, turning somersaults, twisting and contorting their bodies.

"They're trying to tell you how happy they are to see you," Sparks answered. "They haven't learned how to talk to us yet — but they sure know how to make signs."

THE END



THE PLANTS

By MURRAY LEINSTER

be discounted, even if it were just a pretty flower.
be discounted, even if it were jus ta pretty flower.

THE plants on Aiolo grew by thousands and millions and hundreds of millions over the wide flat plains of the planet. It was not a very luring planet, perhaps, but the plants knew no other and they were content. They were all alike. Every one was a flower with a singularly complicated centre and a wide collar of white petals. It grew four feet high upon a reedy, seemingly flimsy stalk. Up at the top, just under the blossom, there was a furry thickening of the stalk for about six inches. This thick part was asymmetric, with lumps here and there as if the organism within it were far from simple. It was. The plants spent most of the daylight hours gazing at Aiolo's tiny, blue-white sun. Now and then, though, they turned

from it to regard each other or any singular occurrence that might take place. But there were not often any occurrences because there was nothing on Aiolo but the plants. Literally nothing. No animals. No birds. No insects. And the plants were all alike. They were not only the dominant species on Aiolo, they were its flora and fauna and everything else.

But one day there came a screaming, far away in Aiolo's thin air, and out of the purplish sky a dark object came hurtling horribly. For a time it travelled almost parallel to the ground, but gradually it descended, struck and bounced upward like a skipped stone, struck and bounced again, and then struck a third time and ploughed a monstrous furrow in the soft earth for a quarter of a mile before it stopped. It killed thousands of the plants of Aiolo in its plunging

After it was still for a long time, four men came staggering out of gaping rents in its plating and gazed dazedly about them. And all the plants within view turned their faces to regard them curiously.

Hours after their landing, the four men built a campfire in the great furrow dug by the Copernicus' shattered hull. They brought out shattered burnable litter from the ship's interior to use for fuel, because, of course, the plants would not burn. As they cooked, the sun sank abruptly and the formerly faintly-visible stars came out with astonishing brilliance. The only light anywhere on the ground was that of the campfire. The flames licked high and burned with more than ordinary brightness. The atmosphere of Aiolo was only five per cent. nitrogen, and despite its thinness men could breathe without air tanks, and fire could burn.

The men moved about the fire with stiff and painful motions as if badly bruised and shaken. Around them the round flower faces turned toward the flames or the men or both. They made an effect of innumerable marvelling listeners. The men had found their stalks too tough to be readily brushed aside, and they camped in the cleared furrow for convenience.

"After thinkin' it over," said one of the men ironically, "an' even allowin' for the fact that we're still alive, I still say we're in a fix. Slade musta been crazy!"

A second man—Caxton—said meditatively:

"No-o-, Burton. He planned it too carefully. Some of his explosives must have been set before we left port. And he pushed off in the lifeboat before they went off. They were exactly calculated to wreck the Copernicus from stem to stern. He had some scheme in mind, but just what —"

"It was just murder!" said Burton stubbornly. "He was a killin' lunatic. There were 48 men in the ship, countin' him. Forty-three of 'em died right off. We shoulda died, too. He just meant to kill everybody. What'd he gain by wreckin' the old ship 50 light-years from anywhere?"

A third man, Palmer, said heavily:

"There's 12 million stellars worth of iridium on board. If he figured he could get away with that somehow—He might figure on coming back to loot it. He'd have the Copernicus' course and speed."

"Yeah?" said Burton scornfully. "How'd he reach any place to come back from? All he had was a lifeboat! An' what'd the ship's course an' speed be by the time he did get back?"

Caxton nodded.

"I agree on that, Burton. If you don't find a wreck pretty quick you don't find it. But still I think Slade had some scheme in mind. He wasn't just a maniac killing people. A maniac likes to see people die, and he left hours ahead of time."

They ate as they talked, but the food was not really cooked. The boiling point of water in the thin air of Aiolo was well below 212 Fahrenheit. The food was hardly more than well-warmed, save where it was burnt. The coffee could be drawn straight from the boiling pot without scorching one's tongue.

Presently they fell silent gazing into the fire. Their situation was completely without hope of betterment. The hull and drive of the Copernicus was shattered far past patching. The ship's fuel was gone to the last ounce. The wrecking of the ship in midspace had been a triumph of ingenuity and skill. At one instant the freighter had been droning along comfortably at cruising speed on overdrive, taking a direct line between Algol IV and the Briariades. And then, without warning, there was one shattering explosion, then two more, and then a monstrous blast which seemed like the end of all things. Within seconds the Copernicus changed from a well-found, space-worthy vessel to a riddled, airless, powerless hunk, its overdrive off, and therefore next to no forward velocity.

The four men beside the campfire on Aiolo were the only survivors beside the man who had set off the blasts by machinery. They had happened to be off watch in the only two compartments of the ship which were neither cracked open by the explosions nor emptied of air by the jamming of self-sealing doors. Their situation had seemed hopeless then.

Even now it was hardly better, though something like a miracle was responsible for their being still alive. No possible astrogator could have calculated a landing such as they had made, nor could any wreck have grounded approximately in one piece on any planet less featureless than Aiolo. The derelict had hit the atmosphere travelling west to east at the flattest of conceivable angles. Moreover, it had overtaken the planet in its orbit so that both orbital speed and the speed of rotation could be subtracted from the relative motion of hulk and planet. It had hit within an impossibly small margin of the incredible, at a rate which would allow the atmosphere to slow it without burning it up, and at an angle which allowed it to reach ground like a skipping stone. It bounced twice, ploughed a huge ditch in soft earth, and came to rest.

But the four men who still survived the shaking-up were in no enviable position, at that. They were marooned on Aiolo, which had been visited by men exactly once before in all galactic history. They had no hope whatever of ever leaving it. And their situation was the work of a shipmate who had caused it and then set out, seemingly, to travel 50 light-years in a lifeboat powered for seven.

The night grew chill, even beside the fire. It would be horribly cold presently. Horribly! But in the bright starlight the plants stayed erect and the flowers open, their round faces staring at the fire and the men.

"We might as well turn in," said Caxton presently. "We'll think of something we can do, sooner or later."

The statement was a lie. There was

nothing to think of but endless chilly days and endless frigid nights to come, on a planet on which every square mile seemed to be exactly like every other square mile. They would live here, and grow old, and die. Perhaps in a thousand or a million years another cosmographic expedition would land on Aiolo and find the rusted wreckage of their ship. But that was all they could look forward to.

They had sleeping bags ready. They crawled into them and zipped the flaps shut. The fire died down and died down—

Starlight shone on the broken hulk. and on the four sleeping bags; and on the plants. The flowers stirred subtly. They made tiny, quite imperceptible sounds. Presently those nearest the gouged-out furrow leaned toward the sleeping men. They drooped in tiny jerkings; not at all like the smooth movement of muscle, but they moved. Three of the four men were far beyond their reach, though the nearest flowers strained toward them, but Caxton had happened to sleep with his head quite near to undisturbed ground. Hannet was fairly close to some flower stalks, and one leaned far over and out to approach him, but it could not. Half a dozen or more, however, could hover over Caxton. Their blooms bent down and bent down until they almost touched the cloth of the sleeping bag above his head.

Beyond that, nothing hapened at all. When dawn broke and the men waked, the flowers were all erect again.

But, next morning, as the castaways prepared their necessarily half-cooked breakfast, Caxton said suddenly:

"Look here! Slade left the Copernicus with fuel for at most seven light-years. It's fifty to the nearest inhabitated solar system. We thought he was crazy! But—where are we?"

"Right here," said Palmer gloomily. "And likely to stay, too!"

"Well then—where'd Slade be if he had sense?"

"If he had sense," snapped Burton, "he wouldn't ha' wrecked the ship. But if he wanted to stay alive—"

Then Burton stopped short, his mouth open. Palmer swore suddenly. Hannet growled.

"He'd be here, too," said Burton angrily. "He'd have made for this place and landed! He's somewhere on this planet!"

Caxton nodded. His expression was queer.

"It came to me in my sleep," he said slowly. "I had odd dreams, all mixed up with these flowers. Somehow I had a feeling in my sleep that they were telling me Slade is here. But it makes sense."

He looked uneasily at the flowers, all of which seemed to regard the man and the hulk of the spaceship with a round-eyed curiosity. It was particularly odd that all of them faced the men, because some were on the north and some on the south and east and west. The ground went on to the horizon, completely flat and completely monotonous. As far as the eye could reach, there was nothing in view but these flowers. They were all the same variety. There was no grass underfoot. They were spaced without regularity, but with an amazing equality of space between them.

"Flowers told you? Huh!" snapped Burton. "But that's it, all right. He smashed up the ship and landed here and—"

Again his mouth dropped open.

"But he couldn't ha' figured the ship 'ud land here," he protested. "Nobody coulda calculated the landing we made!"

"Hardly," said Caxton. "No matter how fine his adjustments were, he couldn't time his explosions to make us crack up on Aiolo. He could know, though, that he'd make it in the lifeboat."

"But who'd want to make it here —"

Caxton looked at the flowers speculatively.

"Maybe he had friends waiting." He paused. "There's that 12 million stellars' worth of iridium in the ship, yonder."

The four men looked at one another. One of them got to his feet and swore at the aches and pains which beset him. He went into the ship while Caxton went on evenly:

"Nobody can pirate a ship in space, on overdrive. You can't find it! And nobody can be kept from going on overdrive if he's scared or suspicious. So there's never been real piracy in space. But Slade smashed the Copernicus close to this planet and this sun. He made the ship a hopeless wreck, and went on to join his friends. They'll have a ship, and they'll wait with detector screens out for a derelict to float past—"

Then he got up and dived into the interior of the ship. He entered through a great rent in her plating. There was one huge tear where 30 feet of her inwards were exposed to view. There were sudden, violent crashings inside the hulk.

Caxton came out again, very pale. The other man who'd been inside came out with three or four quite useless objects in his hands.

"There was a Bridewell automatic sender in action," said Caxton briefly. "That would have helped them find her! I smashed it, but probably too late."

Palmer said bitterly:

"I went lookin' for somethin' to fight with. All I could find was torches." He threw them disgustedly away. "Weldin' torches against guns!"

Hannet growled:

"We don't have to hang around to be killed, of course. They wouldn't bother to track us—but they'll know somebody lived through the crash. They'll prob'ly bake the ship just to make sure—"

The four men clenched their hands. It was bad enough to be hopelessly marooned upon a planet inhabited only by flowers with an irritating habit of always staring at one. But it was infuriating to feel sure of the near presence of a ship on which they could return to humanity, save for the slight fact that the crew of that ship would murder them on sight to prevent it. It was most enraging of all to be unarmed.

"The most we can do," said Caxton, "is to hide the iridium. It won't do much good, but at least it'll bother them."

Burton stared around the featureless plain.

"Where you goin' to hide it?" he demanded sourly. "They could track us anywhere. Turn up any dirt an' it'd show from overhead."

"We might bury it in the furrow or under the Copernicus," said Caxton. "They'd expect us to cart it away. So we won't."

There was a sudden wavering motion of the plants about them. The flower faces turned, in small, jerky movements. They faced to the south-

east. All of them. As far as the eye could see, every flower over miles and miles of plain turned and faced in the one direction—which was not the direction of the little blue-white sun.

Then, very faintly at first, there came a roaring noise far away. It was accurately in the direction toward which all the flowers had turned. It moved swiftly along the horizon, and all the flowers turned their blossoms in tiny jerks as it moved. When the roaring noise died out again to nothingness, all the flowers over all the plain were facing to the north-east.

"That's them!" said Palmer furiously. "Let's get that stuff hidden! Not that we want it, but so they won't get it!"

But Caxton was staring at the flowers. As he looked, with many tiny jerkings the blooms which faced away from him turned about again. And again the wrecked Copernicus and the four men were surrounded by staring flower faces, which watched them with an air of charmed attention.

The men set savagely to work to hide the treasure, for which the Copernicus had been wrecked, 43 men murdered, and they themselves hopelessly marooned upon Aiolo.

Toward sundown, Caxton had an idea. He rummaged in shattered cabins until he came upon a tiny picturescope. Men who travel far afield in space have usually some personal pictures they like to look at from time to time. Picturescopes run off such records untiringly, without power supply. Caxton found one with a seemingly full record. He tucked it under his arm and walked off among the plants. It was amazing, once he was among them, to notice that though there was no pattern in their growth—they did not grow in rows or any recognisable arrangement—there was a strict and startling equality in the amount of moist bare earth about their stalks. Each one had as much clear space as would roughly fill a two-foot square. They were not overcrowded. Each had an equal allotment of ground from which to draw its nourishment. And they had no competition. He bent down and fingered the soil. Its top was a closely-matted tissue of roots. There could be no erosion nor could there be any dust-cloud arising from wind blowing over such terrain.

He walked away from the Copernicus. Flower faces turned to regard him as he moved. He walked between the stalks, and every flower stared at him. There was a concerted movement to regard him. At a 100 yards from the ship, he could see that he was surrounded by staring blossoms. Even those in his rear had turned away from the ship to stare after him.

Two hundred yards away, he set up the picturescope and touched its button. It began to function. There were two children waving out of it—evidently the children of the murdered man to whom the picturescope had belonged. The scene changed, and a woman smiled and spoke. That went on for a space, and there was the interior of a living room, with the woman and the children moving about—

Caxton cast sidewise glances at the flowers about him. A few had turned from their fascinated contemplation of himself to look at the picturescope. Others turned twitchily as he watched. A blossom drooped jerkily to approach

the screen. Others drooped to join it. They crowded to contemplate it They almost jostled each other.

Caxton went back toward the wrecked ship Three timcs he stopped to survey the scene behind him. The plants paid no attention to his retreat. Every one within hundreds of yards of the picturescope turned and faced it. Within 10 yards, they drooped and seemed to strain toward it. Caxton reached the great furrow, his expression very queer indeed.

"These flowers are conscious!" he said abruptly, to the others. "They've got intelligence of a sort. Look at them looking at the picturescope!"

Burton said sourly:

"What good's that?"

There was a simultaneous movement of all the blossoms within sight. They stirred and by tiny twitching movements faced to the north-west. Unanimously The men held their breaths. Presently the thin air brought them a faint, faint sound which was the deep-throated roar of a space drive in atmosphere. But it was very faint, and after only seconds it died away

"They heard that before we did," said Caxton calmly, "or else they knew it—another way."

Then he looked where he'd left the picturescope. The flowers about it had straightened up and turned to face the inaudible sound. But as he watched, those about the busily working small machine turned again, and those nearest it dropped toward it until there was a small depression, about the picturescope, in the otherwise perfectly level field of flower heads

The small white sun was very low upon the horizon. It drooped down and was not. Night fell. Hannet built up the fire with more litter from inside the Copernicus. Palmer began to cook.

"Slade's pals know the ship crashed, now," said Burton, seething. "They had trouble believin' it at first, maybe. Odds too big against it. But they know it now! And now they're huntin' it, cussin' because the Bridewell's stopped sendin'. They'll find us though! They're quarterin'—"

Hannet said bitterly:

"And we haven't got a thing to fight with when they do catch up on us!"

Palmer snapped:

"You think we don't know that? Even if we go off an' hide, they'll know somebody was alive around here! So they'll bake the ship just to spoil our grub, an' there's nothin' to eat on the whole planet except what's in the ship."

Caxton said meditatively:

"I think we've got to ask for some help."

The others blinked at him. He waved his hand around, at the white-fringed flower faces now again regarding the fire and the men with an effect of captivated interest.

"These things are intelligent after a fashion. I don't know how intelligent, but—"

"Huh! snapped Burton. "You're goin' to get a pack o' flowers to help fight off a gang of murderers?"

"I don't know," said Caxton. "But it's the only chance we've got."

Hannet grunted. Palmer said belligerently:

"What could flowers do—even if they had brains?"

He poured out barely-warm coffee and Caxton said:

"I don't know what they can do

But I can guess what they've done."

Men grunted skeptically.

"They've wiped out every other life-form on the planet," Caxton pointed out. "They haven't bothered us, to be sure, but we haven't bothered them. In landing, we killed a good many, but it was an accident. We couldn't help it. Maybe they know it. Anyhow they wiped out all competitors before us. There's no other sort of plant and there are no animals and not even an insect. You can't tell me there was never but the one line of evolution! These plants are highly organised. They're specialised! If they'd had no competition, they'd have stayed primitive. But they've developed to what they are because they did have competition which they've now wiped out! They've even arranged to divide up what's left among themselves. Every one has the same amount of space—no more, no less. They're the dominant race on this planet. They have senses —hearing, at least, and certainly sight, and I insist that I had those queer dreams of having the flowers tell me that Slade was here—and he is."

Burton snorted scornfully. The feeling of utter helplessness and hopelessness made all their tempers short. They would be found to-morrow by the ship they'd heard, which was hunting for the Copernicus to loot it of 12 million stellars' worth of iridium. Forty-three men had already died for that iridium. Four more would die to-morrow because, whether the pirate ship killed them in cold blood, or merely turned a heat ray on the wreck and turned all their food to charcoal, they would die. Almost any argument would be maintained to avoid thinking of their infuriating helplessness.

"How'd those flowers fight animals, if there was any?" demanded Burton.

"How did men fight them?" asked Caxton. "Was there ever any single way? Men used their brains. Man specialised on intelligence, and became dominant on Earth. These plants may have done the same thing. At least they're dominant here!"

"O.K.," said Burton in heavy sarcasm. "Talk to 'em, then. Tell 'em we'll bring 'em a load of fertiliser if they'll wipe out Slade an' his gangs so we can go home in his ship!"

"That," said Caxton meditatively, "is just about what I've got to try."

"Crazy!" rasped Burton.

"Quite likely," admitted Caxton, "but I can't think of anything with sense to it that gives us a chance."

The stars on Aiolo were very bright. The air was very thin and very cold. The men in their sleeping bags lay still, and the campfire burned brightly until there were only embers left, and those embers glowed with the brightness of coals in almost pure oxygen. One by one they went out, leaving only ash. But all the men were not in the gouged-out earthen furrow behind the shattered Copernicus. One man lay among the flowers, 20 yards and more from the ship.

It was easy to locate him, even in the starlight, though he could not be seen among the flowers. For many feet around him, every flower stalk was bent toward him. His sleeping bag was almost hidden by hovering blossoms—most of which were clustered as close as possible to his head.

The ground was utterly flat, and it reached out to a horizon utterly without break or projection. It was a monstrous plain, completely filled with the omnipresent flowers. Nearby one

could see between white-petalled blooms to reedy stalks and stringy leaves below. But at a distance the absolutely level sea of blossoms formed a sheet of snowy white.

At what would correspond to 10 o'clock in the morning, the look of the vast expanse of flowers changed. From one horizon to the other, the plants stirred. They moved in tiny jerkings. They faced in one direction.

"This will be it," said Caxton evenly. "They'll find us now."

There was yet no sign of the pirate ship, neither of sight nor of sound. Three of the four men clenched their fists, raging. They might be killed. They might be mocked and left to die. They were filled with an impotent rage at their inability even to offer battle.

Caxton waited with an odd expression on his face. A dull roaring came from very far away. It grew louder It grew thunderous. They saw the spaceship as a tiny speck of light; a moving mote of brightness which was the reflection of the sun from its chromium-bright outer plating. They regarded it in suffocating fury. It went hurtling onward—and suddenly shifted its course. Its momentum carried it on, but it swung toward the crashed Copernicus. It turned again. It made a wide half-circle and headed back toward the wreck and the great furrow in the earth descending as it came. It was a small ship, much less than the freighter it had come to loot. Concealed ports opened in its bow and guns peered out.

Caxton ran back in the furrow and waved violently, trying to cause it to land where there were no plants. It ignored him. One of the bow guns flashed briefly. An acre of flowers exploded in steam, and only blackened stalks and seared earth remained behind. There was a strange, tiny, extraordinarily shrill sound which ran all over the plain of blossoms, as if the flowers themselves had uttered it in rage or horror. All the way to the horizon there was the seeming of commotion, of the agitated twitchings of reedy stalks.

The strange space vessel landed. It had the swollen, obese look of a space tug. It settled heavily upon the newly-charred ground. It was still. Then the gun muzzle swivelled. Another brief flare. Another burst of steam and thin shrill screaming noise. A path of charred emptiness opened from the space tug to the battered, broken wreck. Figures in spacesuits appeared carrying weapons. They walked negligently toward the Copernicus.

Caxton went to meet them. The first face he saw in a space helmet was strange to him. The second was Slade's.

"Hello, Slade," said Caxton coldly. "We figured you were responsible."

Slade grinned.

"Neat job, eh? How'd it miss you?"

"Cabin," said Caxton evenly. "Off duty. The self-sealing door worked."

"Any others?" asked Slade negligently. He raised a weapon very casually.

"Three," said Caxton. He added. "We hid the iridium."

Slade lowered the weapon.

"Yeah? What for?"

"To make a bargain," Caxton told him. "We want transportation to some place where we'll have a chance of being picked up. Promise that and we tell you where the iridium is. Otherwise—look for it!"

"We can get it outa you with a pencil beam," he said amusedly. "One

thing I do wanna know, though. The flowers don't bother you. Why?"

"Why should they?"

"Maybe this's a different kind," said Slade. "Where we were waitin' for the Copernicus to come along, they made some kinda smell or somethin' that put a guy to sleep. That's why we got on spacesuits now. O.K.—Where's the other three?"

Silently, Burton and Palmer and Hannet came into view, their eyes sullenly defiant. Slade grinned at them.

"We came for the iridium," he said in mocking politeness. "I wanna volunteer to tell me where it is, or else the first one to take the pencil beam test. Who's gonna be nice?"

"I'll show you," said Caxton, without intonation. "It was silly to hide it, anyhow."

He led the way. He pointed to where they had dug deep under the Copernicus' plating to bury the precious metal for which their shipmates had died.

"Fine!" said Slade. "You men buried it. Now dig it out!"

Silently, the four men took shovels and began to dig. Slade stood over them with a blaster held negligently in his hand. Those with him explored the ship cautiously. They found no one else in hiding. They began to loot. One man carried a load of personal possessions back to the pirate ship, moving along the lane of charred, destroyed plants. Two men came back with him. More loads of loot. A shattered box of Bynarth lace had spilled half its contents in a broken-open hold. More men came from the pirate ship. The last three came without spacesuits, having been informed that since the four survivors of the wreck had had no trouble, there was no need of spacesuits here.

Caxton and his fellows unearthed the iridium. Twelve million stellars' worth. They dragged it out to the clear space of the furrow.

"Maybe I oughta make you carry it to my ship," said Slade, genially, "but a little exercise'll do my gang good. So—"

He lifted his hand weapon, grinning. It bore upon Caxton. His finger tensed on the trigger.

And that was all. He ceased to move. His eyes closed. He stood rocking on his feet, breathing heavily.

There was silence. Inside and outside the wreck there was stillness. Caxton turned his head and saw two men from the pirate ship, on their way back to it with loot taken from the Copernicus. They stood still swaying a little on their feet. There was no movement anywhere.

"All right," said Caxton coldly, "we'll load up the iridium. That'll be salvage, anyhow. Maybe we'll come back for the rest. Maybe not."

The four men began the transfer. When the last of the iridium was loaded, Caxton went back and took away the weapons from the seemingly paralysed pirates.

Burton said furiously:

"Ain't you goin' to blast 'em off?"

"I promised not to," said Caxton grimly. "Besides, we couldn't. Slade had his finger tensed to kill me and he was stopped. We'd be, too."

Burton grumbled. Then he said defiantly:

"Whadda we do now, then?"

"Take off," said Caxton.

He went into the ship. Its entire company was outside. There were

only the four survivors of the Coperieus.

The strange ship rose vertically from the ground. Caxton, in the control room, looked at the bottom visiplate. The wrecked spaceship below already grew small upon the screen, but the two blasted areas—in which thousands upon thousands of the plants of Aiolo had died—were still visible. And he saw moving dots. The men who had come to Aiolo in this ship, but now were left behind, marched somnambulistically toward the larger burned-out space in which the pirate ship had landed. But that space dwindled still more as the ship rose, until nothing could be seen at all except the illimitable expanse covered by the flowers—the plants of Aiolo.

"They're the dominant race of Aiolo," said Caxton doggedly "It's as I told you. Like men, they specialised on intelligence. Men specialised on intelligence to tell them what to do. Men had hands to do things with. But those things were plants. They could only specialise on intelligence to tell other things what to do. To tell animals to keep away from them. for instance. They are tiny enough, and maybe the will power of a single one isn't enough to—well—hypnotise anything or anybody. But when a whole field of them concentrates on telling something or somebody what they must do—why there's not much chance of disobeying them. Animals. in the past, were useful to them. They made the animals devour other plants—made animals clear ground for them to spread to. But when they'd spread everywhere, they'd had no use for the animals. So—"

"Huh!" said Burton, "They didn't bother us!"

"We didn't bother them," said Caxton dryly. "And the intelligenee that can force itself on other minds hasn't much trouble extracting information for them. They knew everything we thought."

"But—"

"Surely they could have killed us," said Caxton irritably. "It annoys me to think how completely we were at their mercy! But they knew—from our brains—that our arrival was an accident. They knew we were the victims of others of our own kind. And somewhere on the other side of Aiolo, Slade and his gang had made trouble for the plants. He said something about the plants giving off a smell or something that put men to sleep. That was his interpretation. Actually, he and his gang had burned off a 10-acre space simply to have room to move around in. He killed millions of the plants. They fought back the only way they could. But apparently a four-inch steel hull is a barrier to—whatever force a mind or minds can exert on others. They couldn't affect anybody inside the ship, and the more they worked on men outside the ship, the bigger the swathe of plants was burned down by the men inside the ship, to 'clear the air.' Naturally, the plants wanted to get rid of those men and of their ship, too."

"How d'you know all this?" demanded Hannet skeptically.

"The plants told me," said Caxton evenly. "Our minds are made to decide things. Their minds are made to communicate and command things They could read our minds, but they couldn't communicate ideas—only commands—unless we were asleep. and even then only with difficulty. So I had to go out and sleep among

them to be able to tell me. We made what you might call a bargain—while I was asleep."

"Meanin'," said Burton, "you dreamed it! Huh!"

"Who's dreaming now," asked Cax ton, "that we're on this ship headed for the Briariades, 50 light-years off, instead of waiting to die on Aiolo?"

There was no answer to that.

There was a blackened, empty space where a ship-mounted blaster had played, and there was a deep furrow where the Copernicus had ploughed horribly through soft earth as it stopped. But the blackened space was smaller than it had been. There were new small plants growing up, and tall, full-grown plants leaned strainingly far out beyond them to touch the ground at appropriate spots for yet other new plants to start. It would not be long before the naked furrow and the charred spaces would again be filled with growing plants. There was, to be sure, a curious mound at one place in that clearing—it had been men—and the wreck of the Copernicus would stand up above the flowers for long centuries to come. But the situation was well in hand. On the other side of the globe, too, a process of repair was in progress.

So that, with a return to normal quite definitely on the way, the flowers could spend most of their daylight hours gazing at their tiny, blue-white sun. But now and again they did turn from it to regard each other, and, of course, they would always turn to regard any singular occurrence that might take place. But there would not be many happenings, because there was—again—nothing on Aiolo but the plants.

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